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## TOWARDS CONFRONTATION

THE MINERS have been at the centre of all the great working-class struggles in Britain this century — the Labour Unrest of 1910–14, the General Strike of 1926, and the strike wave of 1970–4. The strike which has just ended has its roots in the miners' strikes of 1972 and 1974, which first humiliated and then caused the downfall of the Tory administration of Edward Heath.

The struggles against the Heath government were described by the labour historian Royden Harrison as 'the most extraordinary triumph of trade unionism in its long conflict with government':

First they blew the Government 'off course'; then they landed it on the rocks. First, they compelled the Prime Minister to receive them in 10 Downing Street — which he had sworn he would never do — and forced him to concede more in 24 hours than had been conceded in the last 24 years. Then two years later their strike led him to introduce the three-day week — a novel system of government by catastrophe — for which he was rewarded with defeat at the General Election.<sup>1</sup>

The strike of 1972 was the first national action taken by the miners' union since their terrible defeat in the seven-month lockout of 1926. What launched them into battle — and to victory — after nearly fifty years of keeping their heads down?

### **The miners and Labour**

The leaders of the miners' union reacted to the defeat of 1926 by



concluding that industrial action was doomed to failure. Only the election of a Labour government, their union leaders argued, could solve the miners' problems by nationalising the industry. In 1945 such hopes were answered with the election of the first Labour government to have an overall majority in parliament. On 1 January 1947 the mining industry passed into state ownership.

The mineworkers' leaders argued for the next 20 years that an industry run by the National Coal Board was very different from one in private hands. NUM president Sidney Ford said in 1963: 'People who foster the idea that there are two sides in this industry with separate and conflicting interests not only do a great disservice to those who rely upon this industry for their livelihood, but their attitude serves to project a distorted image of nationalisation.'

In line with this approach, an elaborate structure of joint conciliation and consultation between the Coal Board and the NUM was set up. A joint statement by the NCB and the union declared: 'There is no justification whatsoever for stoppages or strikes, which not only delay the ultimate settlement, but also result in a loss of earnings for the workpeople and much harm to the industry.'

But nothing fundamental had changed. True, the mines were no longer controlled by private colliery owners intent only on short-term profit. Instead they were run — not by the miners — but by the Coal Board, which represented the interests of British capitalism as a whole.

For the first decade after nationalisation, these interests demanded the production of as much coal as possible. The rapidly-growing postwar economy still ran on coal: in 1947 coal provided more than 90 per cent of inland energy consumption in the United Kingdom. This coal was priced below what it would fetch on the market, in order to subsidise the profits of the rest of British industry. Miners were constantly exhorted to produce, first by the 1945–51 Labour government, then by its Tory successors.

Then in 1957 the demand for coal dropped dramatically. Cheap oil began to supplant coal as a source of energy. The NCB lost two of its main markets in the 1960s, after the discovery of North Sea gas and the replacement of steam by diesel engines on the railways. Coal dropped from 85.4 per cent of inland energy consumption in 1955 to 46.6 per cent in 1970.

To add to this, the 1950s and 1960s were a time of rapid mechanisation in the pits. The most important development was the spread of power loading, which involved coal-cutting and loading in



one single mechanical operation. The proportion of coal which was power-loaded rose from 23 per cent in 1957 to 92 per cent in 1968. This meant that fewer miners could extract the same amount of coal, at a time when less coal was wanted anyway.

The result of these changes for the miners was catastrophic. In 1955 there were 698 collieries. By 1971 the number had fallen to 292. The number of miners went down from 698,700 to 292,000. More than four hundred thousand jobs went.

Those miners who did not leave the industry found themselves transformed often into what Mick McGahey called 'industrial gypsies', driven by closures from one pit to another, and often from one part of the country to another.

The leaders of the miners' union offered no resistance to the closures. 'Our only hope of government assistance lies in the return of a Labour government,' Sidney Ford told the 1962 NUM conference. In October 1964 such a government was elected. Its manifesto contained a pledge to maintain coal production at 200 million tons a year. But the new Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, and his cabinet were concerned to establish Labour as the 'natural party of government', as efficient administrators of capitalism. They were not centrally concerned to promote the interests of their working-class supporters. Trade unionists generally had to face wage controls and spending cuts. And the miners were confronted with the continued rundown of the coal industry, despite Labour's election promises.

Will Paynter, then NUM general secretary, said of his first meeting with Economics Minister George Brown in November 1964: 'It was clear then that they were going to put industry and power stations onto fuel oil and nuclear power.' This was confirmed in September 1965 when a target for coal production was fixed: 170–180 million tons by 1970. High-cost pits were to be closed however large their reserves of coal.

The Coal Board closed down another 200 collieries between 1965 and 1969 — one pit almost every week for four years.

The NUM leadership protested against this betrayal, but took no action to prevent the closures. A special conference debated whether or not to take industrial action in March 1968. Will Paynter, speaking for the national executive, denounced the idea, preferring instead to rely on 'the agitation and the pressure that we and the miners' MPs have been able to exercise upon the government.' Conference backed him.



## The rise of the NUM left

The supine attitude of the miners' leaders towards the closures of the 1950s and 1960s was partly a consequence of their politics. The NUM was, until the early 1970s, dominated by right-wing Labour.

The power of the right wing nationally rested on the balance of forces in the coalfields. The miners' union has been described as 'a federation of trade unions, even a federation of pit villages, with an untidy organisational structure and overlapping and competing unions.'<sup>2</sup> Organisation emerged first at pit and county level, reflecting the differences between private employers and coalfields. The Miners' Federation of Great Britain was formed in 1889, bringing together the main county unions — and these county unions still held most of the power, as the partial disintegration of the MFGB after the 1926 lockout showed. Above all, the piecework payment system for face-workers meant that wages were negotiated locally.

The Second World War brought national bargaining over wages and output — and in 1944 the MFGB became the National Union of Mineworkers. 'The authority and government of the union' was given to the annual delegate conference. The change, however, was more of form than of substance. The county unions, renamed Areas, survived. Twenty in number today, they are legally registered trade unions with their own officials and funds. Voting at conferences and on the national executive is still decided at the Area level. The national union is still a federation of powerful Area unions.

The base of the left in the NUM after the war was concentrated in three Areas: Scotland, South Wales and Kent. These were the strongholds of the Communist Party, a tribute to its role in the miners' struggles of the 1920s and 1930s. The left was powerful enough to elect two Communist Party members in succession to the post of NUM general secretary, Arthur Horner (1945–59), and Will Paynter (1959–68). But the Communist Party did not offer a different strategy to that of the right wing. Vic Allen writes:

The political divisions amongst miners reflected differences in emphases not basic attitudes. Communist Party members . . . in official positions around the coalfields continued to advocate continuity in the union's policy of co-operation with the NCB . . . The union revealed no significant sectional differences over the important issues which faced it. On the question of contraction it insisted that the decisions to close pits, when and where, were the prerogative of the management. The union intervened



only to facilitate the closures by assisting to alleviate the hardships which might result from them.<sup>3</sup>

But the subservience of the right and the impotence of the left did not mean that miners took no action to defend their interests. On the contrary, between 1947 and 1957 disputes in coal mining were 70.5 per cent of all industrial disputes, accounting for 21.9 per cent of the total number of strike days in those years. These were all unofficial disputes, and were usually over the locally-negotiated piece-rates paid to faceworkers.

Militancy was concentrated in certain coalfields — Scotland, South Wales, and, despite right-wing control of the Area union, in Yorkshire. These three coalfields, 'which together have accounted for no more than 54 per cent of the NCB's pits and provided employment for less than half the industry's wage-earners, have been responsible for over 85 per cent of work stoppages and restrictions in most post-war years.'<sup>4</sup>

There were big unofficial strikes in Yorkshire in 1955 and 1961 — and this partly reflected Communist Party influence. The Yorkshire NUM is divided into a number of 'panels' (four since 1967, eight before that) corresponding to the NCB areas. Delegates from the NUM branches in each of these areas meet regularly as the panel. In theory they are just a channel of communication for the Area executive; in practice, as Andrew Taylor puts it, 'at times they have acted as alternative union structures.'<sup>5</sup> The Doncaster panel was the stronghold of the left wing of the Yorkshire NUM in the 1950s and 1960s.

The Communist Party's strategy in Yorkshire was, however, focused less on unofficial militancy as a means of building up independent rank-and-file organisation among miners than as a base for winning control of the official machine. Don Baines, one early member of the Yorkshire left, explained: 'The main thing was to get people elected to vacancies in the Area and nationally where they could exert influence. Policies were secondary at that stage. The main task was to identify vacancies and identify candidates for them.'<sup>6</sup>

The Yorkshire left did achieve some electoral successes. But what brought it to power was a tidal wave of rank-and-file militancy culminating in the national strike of 1972.

A number of factors lay behind this explosion. The most important was the policies of the 1964–70 Labour government. Until the mid-1960s Yorkshire had been comparatively little affected by pit closures. But the Wilson government called in September 1965 for



coal output to be concentrated in the most productive pits rather than, as previously, the most productive coalfields. Consequently, Yorkshire suffered from the wave of closures in the late 1960s. Previously, redundant miners had found it fairly easy to find jobs elsewhere. The economy was booming and unemployment low. But the Labour government presided in the late 1960s over a sharp rise in unemployment. Miners hit by closures began to feel that there was nowhere else to go.

The lengthening dole queues were simply one aspect of the Wilson government's attacks on workers. The rate of profit in British industry was much lower than in other Western capitalist countries. Faced with the decline of British capitalism, increasing competitive pressures from abroad, and, towards the end of the decade, the first signs of the world slump, the Labour government sought to reduce real wages and thus increase the rate of profit.

The NUM leadership no more opposed Labour's wage controls than it did the pit closures. Faced, however, with considerable rank-and-file anger provoked by wage controls, the miners' leaders looked for a way round the problem. Salvation seemed to come when the Coal Board proposed to replace piece-rate wages with a nationally-negotiated day wage. The result was the National Power Loading Agreement (NPLA), signed in 1966. The NPLA was a productivity deal, made possible by the rapid spread of power-loading underground — though many militants welcomed it as a way of getting unity in the union.

Under the NPLA, instead of faceworkers' wages being fixed by bargaining at pit and Area level over piece rates, a set of common task rates would be negotiated nationally. For the NUM leadership this had the advantage of giving them, rather than the Area unions, control over wage negotiations. Also, because NPLA was a productivity deal, wages could be increased without clashing with the Labour government's incomes policy.

Whatever the intentions of the Coal Board and the NUM leadership, the NPLA blew up in their faces. The agreement involved equalising wage rates across the coalfields. To prevent big increases which would have undermined Labour's incomes policy, this was done by giving faceworkers in the low-cost coalfields such as Yorkshire and Nottinghamshire far lower pay increases than their counterparts in high-cost coalfields. The late 1960s were a period of rapidly rising prices. Faceworkers especially saw their wages fall behind inflation. This was, moreover, a time when wages generally were rising rapidly. Miners' wages sank behind those of other workers: weekly earnings in



coal mining were 122 per cent of average weekly earnings in 1956, 105 per cent in 1960, 99 per cent in 1966, and 89 per cent in 1970.

‘The effect of the NPLA was to equalise pay, but in doing so, *low pay* was “nationalised” and the unforeseen effect of NPLA was to “nationalise” dissatisfaction over wages throughout the NUM.’<sup>7</sup> The miners were, as a result, united as never before — each pit, and each Area, focussed on the one demand: better wages for the industry as a whole.

Yorkshire was at the centre of this new militancy. The traditions of unofficial organisation and militancy among Yorkshire miners converged in the late 1960s with the politics of the Yorkshire left, bringing the emergence of a new generation of rank-and-file leaders.

These leaders — above all Arthur Scargill — were as much shaped by the aggressive militancy of the 1950s and 1960s as they were by the machine politics of the official left. Above all, they were willing to lead unofficial action and to organise openly in defiance of the Area and national bureaucracy. In 1967, Scargill, a delegate from Woolley pit near Barnsley and a Labour member of the Yorkshire left, formed the Barnsley Miners’ Forum. It met monthly, and was open to militant miners throughout the Yorkshire coalfield. Vic Allen describes how the Forum worked:

The Forum was held on Friday evenings at Barnsley Co-operative Hall and was attended by hundreds of miners who listened to speeches by Lawrence Daly, Michael McGahey, Emlyn Williams, Jack Dunn and others. For the first time many young miners heard arguments against pit closures, in favour of high wages and a shorter working week. Through this medium Scargill acted as a catalyst with a small group of Barnsley miners including Peter Tait, George Wilkinson, Ron Rigby and Don Baines. They met in a room of a Barnsley hotel where Roy Mason, who became Minister of Power in July 1968, often drank in an adjoining bar.

Fairly quickly these miners developed a cohesion which had not been present before. They were competent branch officials who until now had struggled in the isolation of their branches. They had never controlled the Barnsley panel but collectively they began to discover that they could influence its proceedings. Within a relatively short period they controlled it in much the same way as the Doncaster one was controlled by Ian Ferguson, Jim Oldham, Owen Briscoe, Mick Welsh and



Tommy Mullany. These representatives of the Barnsley miners began to meet with the Doncaster ones to discuss policy and strategy.<sup>8</sup>

A national Miners' Forum representing the left in Scotland, South Wales, Kent and Yorkshire also began to meet regularly in 1967. Like the old Yorkshire left its strategy was primarily electoral. Its first success was the election of Lawrence Daly, an ex-Communist from Scotland, to succeed Will Paynter as general secretary of the NUM in December 1968.

Of far greater importance, however, was the final explosion of miners' frustration over low pay in October 1969. The catalyst was the NUM demand for a forty-hour week for surface workers. Surface workers were usually older miners, no longer fit enough to work underground, and paid far lower rates than faceworkers. The Coal Board's refusal to concede them a forty-hour week was the last straw for miners already pushed to the limit by closures and low pay. On 11 October 1969 a special meeting of the Yorkshire NUM Area council brushed aside the constitutional objections of the right-wing Yorkshire president, Sam Bullough, and voted for an unofficial strike.

Control of the strike was in the hands of the four Yorkshire panels. Arthur Scargill later described how they operated:

We formed an unofficial strike committee . . . And the first thing we did was to ask ourselves . . . was every pit in Yorkshire out? And the answer then 'yes'. That was completely sewn up. Now what was the next step? Then the next step was to get out every other pit in Britain if we could. So we sent emissaries to Scotland and to Wales, because we didn't think we needed pickets, and asked them to come out . . . And then we launched pickets into Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire. We decided that the best way that we could produce an effective stoppage was to have a rapid mobile picket.<sup>9</sup>

The flying picket had been used on a limited scale in the unofficial strikes in Yorkshire of 1955 and 1961. The unofficial leadership of the 1969 strike now organised flying pickets systematically.

We launched from the coalfield here squads of cars, minibuses and buses, all directed onto predetermined targets, with five, six, seven hundred miners at a time. Of course, the police were going to come, but they couldn't cover forty points at a time, without bringing the British armed forces in.<sup>10</sup>



At the strike's height, 140 pits in Yorkshire, South Wales, Scotland, and the Midlands were out. Scargill emphasised:

You've got to understand that this strike was totally unofficial. We were getting no assistance from the Area headquarters of the union, we had no financial assistance and were launching into that coalfield [Notts and Derbyshire] on our own, out of our own pockets, in a sense.<sup>11</sup>

This unofficial leadership was all the more impressive in comparison with the performance of the NUM left nationally. Lawrence Daly, the recently elected left-wing general secretary, called on the strikers to return to work. The South Wales Area executive opposed the strike, and Mick McGahey, the Scottish Area president, remained silent. The Coal Board met the miners' pay claim in full, but did not concede the 40-hour week for surface workers.

The unofficial strike of 1969 set the pattern for the great battles of the early 1970s. It showed that the miners could take national strike action and force concessions from the NCB. The passive acceptance of industrial decline had been finally broken. Above all, the impulse behind the strike came from below.

### **The strikes of 1972 and 1974**

The miners were not alone in their militancy. The late 1960s saw a rising curve of class struggle. The Labour government's wage controls brought it into conflict with the powerful rank-and-file organisation which had been built up during the years of the postwar boom in a number of industries — cars, docks, engineering and shipbuilding, as well as mining. Workers, confident of their own strength thanks to the bargaining power given them by full employment, refused to accept the pay restraint Labour now sought to impose on them. The result was a rapid increase in strikes, most of them unofficial.

The response from the government was to draft anti-union legislation. The Labour government's move to outlaw unofficial strikes, the White Paper **In Place of Strife**, was forced back by opposition both inside and outside parliament — but after the Tories won the general election of June 1970 with Edward Heath as prime minister, the Industrial Relations Act became law in 1971. With strict limits on picketing and a special court to deal with trade unionists who broke the new law, the Tories were set on confrontation.

The test of their strategy was soon to come. There was a preliminary skirmish between the Tories and the miners in October 1970



when the Doncaster panel launched an unofficial strike which at its height embraced 116 pits. It was, however, less solid than its predecessor a year before, and soon crumbled. Then on 1 November 1971 the NUM imposed an overtime ban in support of its demand for pay increases in breach of the Tory pay limits. Miners voted, by 58.8 per cent in favour of a strike in a pithead ballot on 2 December — and on 9 January 1972 the first national miners' strike since 1926 began.

The union's national executive, now headed by Joe Gormley, whose election in 1971 kept the union presidency in right-wing hands, issued instructions for pickets to halt the movement of coal completely. Responsibility for different parts of the country was allocated to the various Areas. Yorkshire, for example, was given the power stations of East Anglia.

Rank-and-file organisation of the same kind as had led the 1969 and 1970 strikes, not the official leadership, stopped the movement of coal. Scargill later recalled:

We had every pit picketed on the first morning to get out the weekly-paid industrial staff members, who were not members of the Yorkshire NUM . . . After this we immediately switched our attack to every major coal depot and power station in the region . . . I was appointed spokesman of the Barnsley Area Strike Committee and also put in charge of picketing. We had a number of battles inside the Committee as to the best tactics to employ. We had a thousand pickets deployed into East Anglia, and we had a major battle inside the Strike Committee. The differences of opinion were whether we should concentrate the pickets on one target or whether we should dispatch them all over East Anglia to all the power stations. And the argument that won the day was the one to send them to Yarmouth, to Bedford, to Cambridge, to Ipswich, to Norwich, to all the different power stations. I said that this was stupid and would not prove successful. For three days we battled with police in the East Anglia area. Then we had a weekend Strike Committee meeting and changed the policy. I picked the phone up and called East Anglia HQ and said 'Move everything in onto Ipswich dock, move everything we can.' We produced a thousand pickets in an hour and a half on Ipswich dock, and stopped the dock in an hour. We left a token picket at the docks, moved on, and closed down the power stations one by one. Within two days we'd shut the whole of East Anglia.<sup>12</sup>



Tactics of this sort rapidly halted the movement of coal — but it was not simply the miners' achievement. Rank-and-file trade unionists in other industries observed the TUC guidelines requiring them to respect NUM picket lines. The success of the flying pickets reflected the strength and confidence of workers generally.

This was most evident in the turning point of the strike, the battle of Saltley gate. By the beginning of February the strike was hitting home, as a succession of power cuts showed. The last substantial stockpile of coke was at Saltley depot in Birmingham. Scargill himself commented afterwards: 'The [miners'] picket line didn't close Saltley, what happened was the working class closed Saltley.'<sup>13</sup>

Even 3,000 miners led by Scargill couldn't stop the coke lorries in five days of picketing. But on Tuesday 8 February Scargill addressed the East Birmingham district of the Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers. 'We don't want your pound notes,' he told them. 'Will you go down in history as the working class in Birmingham who stood by while the miners were battered down or will you become immortal? I do not ask you — I *demand* that you come out on strike.'

The AUEW and the Transport and General Workers Union called their members in Birmingham out on strike the next day. On Thursday 10 February 100,000 Birmingham trade unionists came out, and 20,000 marched on Saltley. Scargill described what happened:

Some of the lads . . . were a bit dispirited . . . And then over this hill came a banner and I've never seen in my life as many people following a banner. As far as the eye could see it was just a mass of people marching towards Saltley. There was a huge roar and from the other side of the hill they were coming the other way. They were coming from five directions; it was in a hollow, they were arriving from every direction. And our lads were just jumping in the air with emotion — a fantastic situation . . . I started to chant . . . : 'Close the Gates! Close the Gates!' and it was taken up, just like a football crowd. It was booming through Saltley: 'Close the Gates'. It reverberated right across this hollow and each time they shouted this slogan they moved, and the police, who were four deep, couldn't help it, they were getting moved in. And Capper, the Chief Constable of Birmingham, took a swift decision. He said 'Close the Gates' and they swung to. Hats were in the air, you've never seen anything like it in your life. Absolute delirium on the part of the people who were there. Because the Birmingham working class were there — not



as observers but as participants.<sup>14</sup>

Reginald Maudling, the Tory Home Secretary, explained in his memoirs the dilemma Saltley posed for the government:

then then Chief Constable of Birmingham assured me that only over his dead body would they [the pickets] . . . succeed [in closing Saltley]. I felt constrained to ring him the next day after it happened to enquire after his health! I am sure the decision he took was a wise one, because the number of strikers involved was so great, and feelings were running so high, that any attempt by the relatively small body of police who could be assembled to keep the depot open by force could have led to very grave consequences. Some of my colleagues asked me afterwards, why I had not sent in troops to support the police, and I remember asking them one single question: 'If they had been sent in, should they have gone in with their rifles loaded or unloaded?' Either course could have been disastrous.<sup>15</sup>

Short of bringing in the army, which would have brought the danger of a much more generalised confrontation with the working-class movement, the closure of Saltley left the Tories with no alternative but to concede defeat. Heath found a means of surrender by appointing a Court of Inquiry into miners' wages which went a long way to meeting the miners' demands. Even so it took a meeting between Heath and the NUM executive at 10 Downing Street, where further concessions were made, to end the strike.

The miners had won a historic victory. It reflected a general class militancy unprecedented for fifty years. 1972 saw not only the miners' strike but also the first national builders' strike since the 1920s, and a wave of factory occupations by engineering workers in the Manchester area. And in July the Industrial Relations Act received a near fatal blow when unofficial strike action forced the release of five dockers' leaders imprisoned in Pentonville for picketing in defiance of the Tories' law.

But Heath was not ready to concede defeat. In the autumn of 1972 he imposed a statutory wage freeze, followed by two more phases of pay restraint. The economic situation had in the meantime changed dramatically. 1972 and 1973 were years of boom, not only in Britain but throughout Western capitalism. But by the summer of 1973 the signs of recession were evident, as inflation soared and profit rates shrank. Then in October 1973 war broke out in the Middle East, leading to the quadrupling of the price of oil. The oil crisis tipped the



world economy into the first great slump since the 1930s.

This energy squeeze increased the miners' bargaining power. Coal was now a far more attractive source of energy than it had been in the era of cheap oil. At the same time, Heath realised that British capitalism could now be restored to profitability only by a far more savage reduction of workers' living standards than had previously been assumed. Concessions to the miners might unleash a tidal wave of wage militancy. The Tories set their face against a compromise over the miners' 1973 pay claim.

The NUM imposed an overtime ban on 21 November, and a strike ballot was called for 1 February 1974 only after protracted negotiations and when it became clear that the ban was not reducing coal stocks as much as had been expected. The Tories attempted to isolate the miners from other workers by introducing a three-day working week, ostensibly to save energy. The miners voted by an 81 per cent majority for strike action and the executive called the miners out from 9 February. Heath reacted by calling a general election.

The 1974 miners' strike took place amid scenes of great panic in the ruling class. Yet the strike was very different from that in 1972. It was tightly controlled from the top. Vic Allen explains the attitude of Gormley and other miners' leaders:

It was clear that on this occasion they wanted to avoid the spontaneity of 1972, the relative autonomy of local strike committees and the confrontations. This time they wanted to control the strike from the national centre so they could determine tactics and regulate its scope. They planned from the outset to contain the strike and, in so far as it was possible, to give it a respectable image. The national officials wanted the success of 1972 but none of its abrasive tactics which so obviously made that success possible.<sup>16</sup>

One major reason for Gormley's insistence on controlling the strike was the general election. Heath wanted to make the central issue 'Who governs the country — the trade unions or parliament?' The Tories mounted a red-baiting campaign aimed especially at Mick McGahey, a member of the Communist Party who in 1973 had been elected vice-president of the NUM. Gormley was desperate to avoid doing anything that would embarrass the Labour Party in the general election. He even supported Heath's suggestion that the strike be suspended for the duration of the election campaign.

But the union executive rejected this proposal. Nevertheless



tight control was imposed on picketing. Gormley said: 'The flying picket can just fly out of the window.' Largely it did. A six-man limit was imposed by the executive on the size of pickets, and the movement of coal was halted mainly because other trade unionists respected usually token NUM picket lines. There were no Saltleys in 1974.

The role of the left in the union was also different. The victory of 1972 had enabled them to wrest control of the biggest NUM Area, Yorkshire, from the right wing. In May 1973 Scargill humiliated two right-wingers in the election for Area president. In the autumn of 1973 another left-winger, Owen Briscoe, was elected Yorkshire general secretary. The left was no longer on the outside in Yorkshire. Scargill continued to adopt a very militant stance, arguing at the national executive for example that 'a general election will not solve anything.' But he and his allies did not make the same effort to encourage rank-and-file organisation and initiative as they had in 1972.

The general election saw Labour returned as the largest single party in parliament, and at the beginning of March Harold Wilson again became prime minister. He appointed a left-winger, Michael Foot, as Employment Secretary, and Foot conceded much of what the NUM had demanded. The miners had won again.

### **The 1974-9 Labour government and the incentive scheme**

No workers' victory is permanent as long as capitalism continues to exist. Heath's strategy of frontal assault had failed. The Labour government offered a way of achieving the same objective — reduced living standards and weakened workplace organisation — by other means.

The crux of the new strategy was to be the 'Social Contract' between the Labour government and the TUC. Rather than the state imposing wage controls on workers, the trade union leaders would enforce them on their members in exchange for legislation that favoured the labour movement.

The trade union leaders played a central role in bringing workers to acquiesce in these policies. The two main figures on the TUC left, Jack Jones of the TGWU and Hugh Scanlon of the AUEW, were the most important supporters of the Social Contract, ably assisted by Michael Foot, who invoked the 'red flame of socialist courage' in its defence at the 1975 Labour Party conference.

But the Social Contract permeated every level of the trade union movement. Under Heath there had been a political alternative to the Tories — Labour, a party created and sustained by the trade unions.



To stand out against Labour's *own* wage controls involved going much further politically. Moreover, the system was now in deep crisis. To fight for higher wages when profits were so low was to challenge the economic system of capitalism itself. In the absence of any real forces willing to fight for a socialist alternative, militants took their lead from the trade union leaders, and grudgingly acquiesced in the Social Contract.

Many workplace leaders were caught up in the policies of collaboration with the employers pursued by the trade union bosses. The introduction of 'workers' participation' in the car industry led to senior stewards and convenors being drawn into close co-operation with management. To this was added a steady erosion of workplace organisation. Productivity deals and the consequent decline of piece-work deprived the shop stewards of their basic role, to negotiate the rate for the job. Moreover, an increasing number of senior stewards and convenors became full-time negotiators and became distanced from the shop floor as a result. The sectional workplace organisation which had broken the Heath government was decaying at the roots.

The miners did not escape these changes. Indeed, the 1974 strike, firmly controlled from the top in the interests of the election of a Labour government, set the pattern of the Social Contract years. After the strike, the Labour government set out to draw the NUM into close collaboration with the Coal Board. A tripartite committee for the coal industry was set up, involving government, unions and NCB. The result was the national 'Plan for Coal', approved in October 1974, which envisaged £600 million of investment with the aim of creating 40 million tons of new capacity by 1985. 'Plan 2000', approved in early 1977, proposed to create four million tons of new capacity each year between 1985 and 2000.

As Andrew Taylor comments, 'The political function of this exercise was to secure the co-operation of the NUM, negating the possibility of industrial action.'<sup>17</sup> Gormley and the rest of the right-wing majority on the national executive were quite happy to go along with this. But now there was a much stronger and more militant left wing, whose stronghold was in Yorkshire. Scargill bitterly attacked the 'social con-trick': 'It is unprincipled on the part of certain leaders of the trade union movement to accept decisions, both political and economic, which undermine the living standards of those people they represent because we have a Labour government.'<sup>18</sup>

Average real wages fell by 2 per cent in 1974–5, 4 per cent in 1975–6, and 5 per cent in 1976–7, the biggest reduction for a century.



Miners were affected by this: their earnings were 125 per cent of those in manufacturing in 1975, but only 108 per cent two years later.

This led to rising militancy among miners and a problem for the NUM and the government: how to pay the miners more without destabilising the Social Contract?

The answer was a pit incentive scheme. The Coal Board had been pressing for one since 1974. The NPLA had failed significantly to increase productivity, which actually fell in the 1970s: output per man-shift was 2.44 tonnes in 1970–1, and 2.18 tonnes in 1977. The right wing on the executive also wanted an incentive scheme — for example, Len Clarke, president of the Nottinghamshire Area, whose members, mainly in low-cost pits, would benefit from any deal tying wages to output. Moreover, Phase 3 of the government's incomes policy, which came into force in 1977, permitted 'self-financing' productivity deals. As in the case of the NPLA, the miners' leadership sought a new pay system as a way of avoiding a challenge to Labour wage controls.

Opposition to such a deal came from the left. An incentive scheme, they argued, would set miner against miner, bringing back all the divisions between different pits and coalfields which had existed in the days of piecework. The 1977 NUM conference threw out a motion proposing local incentive schemes.

What followed was remarkable in the light of the attitude taken towards ballots and union democracy by the courts and the NUM right wing during the strike of 1984–5. Gormley and the right carried through a decision at the national executive in September 1977 to put the incentive scheme they had negotiated with the Coal Board to a ballot vote, in defiance of the conference decision. The Kent Area, with Scargill's support, went to the High Court for an injunction overruling this flagrant breach of the NUM rulebook. But the Vice-Chancellor of the High Court, Sir Robert Megarry, backed Gormley and the right. 'What the NEC is proposing to do is to hold a secret ballot of all members. This is the very essence of the democratic process.' The Court of Appeal upheld Megarry's ruling. Lord Denning, the Master of the Rolls, called the ballot 'a far more satisfactory and democratic method than leaving it to the delegates of a conference who might not be truly representative in their individual capacities of the views of the various men they represent.'

So the ballot went ahead in October 1977. The scheme had the support of Tony Benn, the Energy Secretary, who said that it should be given 'a fair trial' since it was designed 'to avoid the evils of past



piecework schemes, which set men against men and lowered safety standards.' The left campaigned vigorously against the scheme, especially in Yorkshire. Scargill called it an 'incentive to dig and let die'. To the consternation of the right wing, 55.75 per cent of miners voted against the scheme.

Far from accepting this result of 'the very essence of the democratic process', Gormley and the right wing had the national executive declare the ballot 'null and void' in November 1977. Areas were permitted to negotiate their own local incentive schemes, which Nottinghamshire and others rapidly proceeded to do.

Back to court the Kent Area went, this time accompanied by Yorkshire and South Wales. Surely the judges would stand by their earlier rulings, and grant an injunction banning the local incentive schemes? The High Court, in the person of Mr Justice Watkins, proceeded to stand on its collective head. 'The result of a ballot, nationally conducted, is not binding upon the National Executive Committee in using its powers in between conferences,' he ruled on 21 December. 'It may serve to persuade the Committee to take one action or the other, or to refrain from action, but it has no great force or significance.' In other words, ballots were OK when the executive won them, but not when they didn't.

The result was a stampede to sign incentive schemes. Even in Yorkshire a majority of miners voted in favour of such a scheme. As its critics had predicted, large gaps opened up between the pay different miners received. For example in the Doncaster panel in September 1978, incentive pay varied from £6.55 a week in one pit to £43.90 in another. The seeds of the divisions of 1984 had been sown.

There were other signs of the future. Scargill's role was changing. Instead of rejecting court interference in union affairs, he supported the court actions against the national executive, creating a dangerous precedent in the light of the judges' role in the strike of 1984-5. Moreover, he did not actively campaign against the incentive scheme in the Yorkshire Area ballot. A majority against the scheme in Yorkshire might have rallied the opposition to the national executive throughout the coalfields.

In the summer of 1978 the three Yorkshire rescue brigades came out on strike against unfair productivity bonuses, low pay rates, and long hours. At Armthorpe they pulled the whole pit out, and organised flying pickets which closed the whole coalfield in a couple of days. A hurriedly convened NUM Area Council condemned the strike. Scargill personally intervened to persuade the two weaker rescue brigades at



Rotherham and Wakefield to return to work, isolating the militants from Armthorpe.

The left-wing leadership in Yorkshire was drifting apart from the rank and file from whom they had sprung. Once the left won control of the Area in 1973 the Barnsley Miners' Forum had begun meeting less regularly. It stopped meeting altogether in 1976. Now that the left were in office, apparently they did not need to organise independently.

The miners were not immune from the general erosion of workplace organisation. The basic unit of the NUM is the pit branch (or lodge in some Areas). Each branch has a committee and four officers, the president, secretary, treasurer, and delegate. The branch secretary was usually a full-time official, and there was a tendency for the president and delegate also to spend much of their time at the surface, away from their fellow miners. Above all, as Scargill boasted in his election address for president, there were few strikes in Yorkshire between 1974 and 1983. The rank and file organisation which had created the flying pickets and led the strikes of 1969, 1970 and 1972 was becoming atrophied. The miners were to pay a terrible price for this in 1984.

### **The Thatcher government: back to confrontation**

Margaret Thatcher became prime minister in May 1979. Since replacing Heath as Tory leader in 1975 she had stood for a radical right-wing attempt to shift the balance of class forces decisively in capital's favour. Thatcher's chief aim was to reverse the defeats inflicted by the miners and other groups of workers on the Heath government.

But the new Tory team had learned from the struggles of the early 1970s. They did not plan an immediate collision with the trade union movement. Rather than attempt to enforce wage controls, which had brought down both previous governments, mass unemployment would be used to discipline workers. Instead of the Industrial Relations Act, with its special register and court which acted as a visible target for opposition, the Tories would legislate piecemeal to widen the powers of the existing courts over the unions.

The new government knew from the experience of their predecessors that the decisive confrontation was likely to come in the public sector where they planned to use the cash-limits originally introduced by Labour Chancellor of the Exchequer Denis Healey to reduce wages and manpower, and to increase the profits of the



nationalised industries. While in opposition they had drawn up plans to deal with this challenge. **The Economist** (27 May 1978) leaked a secret report drafted for Thatcher by Nicholas Ridley, a radical right-wing MP (now Transport Secretary).

In an annexe to the main report, Ridley and some of his co-authors considered how to deal with a 'political threat' from 'the enemies of the next Tory government' in a 'vulnerable industry' such as coal, electricity or the docks. According to **The Economist**, 'they would like a five-part strategy for countering this threat:

- \*Return on capital figures should be rigged so that an above-average wage claim can be paid to the 'vulnerable' industries.

- \*The eventual battle should be on ground chosen by the Tories, in a field chosen by the Tories they think could be won (railways, British Leyland, the civil service or steel).

- \*Every precaution should be taken against a challenge in electricity or gas. Anyway, redundancies in those industries are unlikely to be required. The group believes that the most likely battleground will be the coal industry. They would like a Thatcher government to: (a) build up maximum coal stocks, particularly at the power stations; (b) make contingency plans for the import of coal; (c) encourage the recruitment of non-union lorry drivers by haulage companies to help move coal where necessary; (d) introduce dual coal/oil firing in all power stations as quickly as possible.

- \*The group believes that the greatest deterrent to any strike would be 'to cut off the money supply to the strikers, and make the union finance them' . . .

- \*There should be a large, mobile squad of police equipped and prepared to uphold the law against violent picketing. 'Good non-union drivers' should be recruited to cross picket lines with police protection.

Thatcher's six years in office have followed with eerie precision the pattern laid out in the Ridley report. The Social Security Act 1980 slashed welfare payments to strikers' families, for example, though generally the Tories preferred 'salami' tactics to frontal assault, taking on the working-class movement 'one slice at a time'. One by one, groups of workers were picked off, isolated, and beaten.

First came state-owned British Leyland. In November 1979 the firm's Labour-appointed boss, Michael Edwardes, succeeded in sacking Derek Robinson, convenor of the vast Longbridge plant in Birmingham and a member of the Communist Party. Shop stewards'



organisation had now been neutered in one of its strongholds.

Next came steel: the defeat of the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation in a bitter thirteen-week strike in early 1980 allowed the rapid rundown of the industry. The civil servants followed in 1981, and the health workers and train drivers in 1982.

One reason for these defeats lay in the role of the trade union bureaucracy. The TUC stood by while union after union was beaten by the Tories. In the summer of 1982 the TUC general council itself forced the train drivers' union, ASLEF, to surrender to British Rail.

But the trade union leaders had played much the same role in the early 1970s. The impulse to fight had come then from below, from the rank and file. Thatcher benefitted from the effect of five years of Labour government, from the erosion of shopfloor organisation. Militants no longer felt confident enough to fight independently of the union leaders. To this was added the effect of mass unemployment. For the first time since the 1930s the threat, and only too often the reality of the dole queue, faced every militant trade unionist.

There were exceptions. Above all, the Tories provoked a premature confrontation with the miners. On 10 February 1981 Derek Ezra, chairman of the NCB, told the miners' national executive that to meet government financial targets they would have to close up to fifty pits: twenty-three were to go immediately.

The government had miscalculated. South Wales struck and their flying pickets soon brought out other areas. The militant response in the coalfields took them by surprise. On 18 February Energy Secretary David Howell met the miners' leaders to announce the closure programme was withdrawn.

But the Tories' retreat was purely tactical. Howell explained four years later:

Neither the government nor I think society as a whole was in a position to get locked into a coal strike . . . In those days the stocks weren't so high. I don't think the country was prepared, and the whole NUM and the trade union movement tended to be united all on one side.<sup>19</sup>

Thatcher had run away to fight another day.

The summer of 1981 saw riots in many inner cities, the result of mass unemployment and racism. And on display for the first time in a co-ordinated fashion was another component in the Ridley plan — paramilitary riot police squads. The Tories had been faced in 1972 with the choice between surrendering at Saltley and calling in the army. The



formation of highly mobile police riot squads provided another option, which could be used with less explosive political consequences.

The riot police were not Thatcher's creation. The Special Patrol Group, the first of these squads, was formed by the Metropolitan Police under the 1964–70 Labour government, and the number of similar units, trained in riot control and the use of firearms, grew rapidly under Labour in the later 1970s. But the Tories poured more resources into the police after 1979.

On one estimate 11,000 trained riot police were available nationally. The problem of co-ordinating Britain's 43 police forces in the event of a crisis was solved by means of the National Reporting Centre at New Scotland Yard. The Centre was conceived on 4 April 1972, shortly after the humiliation at Saltley, at a meeting between the Association of Chief Police Officers and senior Home Office officials.

In the general election of June 1983 the Tories trounced a weakened Labour Party and the new centre-right SDP/Liberal Alliance. The formation of Thatcher's second administration marked, it can be seen in retrospect, a turning point. Politically she had been astonishingly successful. Her government had ridden out the highest unemployment since the 1930s without provoking large-scale working-class resistance or losing the next election.

Economically, however, the Tories had made comparatively little headway. Writing after the 1983 general election, Peter Riddell, political editor of the **Financial Times**, expressed the cool judgement passed on Thatcherism by the more intelligent representatives of big business: 'The Thatcher administration has yet to show that it can successfully manage, let alone reverse, Britain's long-term economic decline.'<sup>20</sup>

The previous winter **The Economist**, that other internal organ of the British ruling class, had summed up the problem of British, and indeed world capitalism:

Wages are too high. 'Too high' means the level of wages relative to profits . . . By our calculations . . . , wages in the five largest capitalist economies are now between 8 per cent and 24 per cent higher than they ought to be if profits are to regain the share of national income they held [in the 1960s].<sup>21</sup>

The magazine calculated that, to give profits a 30 per cent share of British national income would require a cut in real wages by 19 per cent. Judged by these standards, Thatcher had been an abject failure. As **The Economist** observed on 11 June 1983, after her triumphant



re-election:

One reason why the Tories came home at a canter in this election is that in their first four years average earnings rose by thirteen percentage points more than prices, at a time when the real value of Britain's gross national product fell by four per cent.

The brunt of the recession had been borne by the unemployed; workers in jobs had seen their real wages rise. Thatcher's political triumph had been won at the cost of economic failure.

These factors explain why, in Thatcher's second term, the Tories have moved more openly on to the offensive against the working-class movement. Two disputes before the miners' strike showed the way the wind was blowing. The struggle over the closed shop at the **Stockport Messenger** in Warrington saw an anti-union small businessman, Eddie Shah, backed by the Tory right, successfully invoke the 1980 Employment Act against one of the toughest craft unions, the National Graphical Association (NGA). Then in January 1984 Thatcher personally intervened to ban the civil service unions at the GCHQ communications centre in Cheltenham.

But Thatcher did not aim to destroy the trade unions. The role of the TUC had been essential in containing mass resistance to redundancies. What she wanted was a weaker, more bureaucratic, less political trade union movement closely policed by the courts. Her model was the trade unions in the United States, whose leaders have passively acquiesced in the mass sackings and pay cuts imposed on them under Ronald Reagan.

The US trade unions had not always been so timid. In the 1930s and 1940s they had displayed enormous militancy. This has been broken only by a concerted ruling-class offensive in the late 1940s and early 1950s involving anti-union legislation (the Taft-Hartley Act) and the systematic weeding out of militants under the guise of Senator Joseph McCarthy's anti-communist crusade.

The Americanisation of the British trade union movement could be achieved only by taking on and decisively defeating a powerful group of workers. The obvious candidate was the miners. They were the only major section of the working class to have successfully resisted the rundown of their industry during Thatcher's first term. Arthur Scargill, elected national president of the NUM after Gormley's retirement in 1981, symbolised the aggressive militancy of the early 1970s.

The Tories had carefully laid their plans. Coal stocks rapidly



built up, from 42.25 million tonnes in 1981 to 57.96 million tonnes two years later. Almost all that increase — nearly 14 million tonnes — took the form of stocks at the power stations.

The government did everything in its power to undermine the coal industry. The NCB's main domestic customer is the Central Electricity Generating Board. With Thatcher's blessing, the CEGB pressed ahead with a programme of increasing the electricity industry's reliance on nuclear power. The policy was justified by cooked figures which purported to show that nuclear power was the cheapest energy source. On a proper comparison, however, nuclear-generated electricity cost 3.2 pence a unit, and coal-fired electricity only 1.8 pence.

The CEGB took other steps aimed at weakening the miners. The price paid for coal used in the power stations lagged in 1979–84 behind the price of electricity, adding to the Coal Board's losses, and helping to create the impression that most pits were 'uneconomic'. In the 1970s a number of huge oil-fired power stations on the south coast which had been planned before the oil crisis were completed. They could have been converted to burning coal as well as oil. Instead, they were simply moth-balled — kept for use in the event of a coal strike.

The miners were squeezed from another direction as well. The 'Plan for Coal' had involved large-scale investment designed to extend the life of existing pits and create new capacity. Central to the investment programme is MINOS (Mine Operating System), a computer system whose aim is to monitor and direct all activities in the pit from a control room on the surface. The 'Plan for Coal' also brought the formation of 'super-pits', either through grouping together existing collieries (16 pits in the Barnsley area were gathered into three complexes centred on automated preparation plants at Woolley, Grime-thorpe and South Kirkby), or through creating new pits, for example at Selby in North Yorkshire.

The introduction of new technology in the pits had enormous implications for the miners. MINOS vastly increases the power of management, allowing them to supervise production directly from the surface control room. The skills of faceworkers and underground craftsmen are increasingly devalued as more and more decisions can be taken on the surface.

The super-pits also meant that fewer men were needed to produce the same amount of coal. The Barnsley reorganisation meant that output could be raised by 21 per cent and manpower reduced by 20 per cent at the same time. The automation involved in MINOS also cut jobs. The planned manning levels for fully integrated MINOS



plants are 53 per cent of current levels.

Crucially, the new technology made many existing pits 'uneconomic'. The introduction of MINOS was concentrated in the central coalfields of Yorkshire, Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire. The resulting productivity increases there meant the NCB would not need many of the pits in the 'peripheral' coalfields of Scotland, South Wales, Durham and Kent.

The Monopolies and Mergers Commission in its June 1983 report on the coal industry classified 141 of the 198 pits as 'uneconomic'.

Bradford University academics estimated that the combined effect of MINOS and the closures announced in March 1984 would be the loss of 100,000 jobs in five years. By March 1989 there would be 79,000 miners concentrated in 94 pits. One of the Bradford team, Jonathan Winterton, wrote in the **New Statesman**:

The Bradford findings have been confirmed by Ian Lloyd, a Conservative MP who is Chairman of the Select Committee on Energy, and who has thus seen confidential NCB evidence. Asked on Yorkshire Television's **First Tuesday** programme last month whether the mining workforce could be reduced to 80,000 within five years, he said: 'Yes, something of that order.'<sup>22</sup>

The message was plain enough. The Coal Board had been able to cut 41,000 jobs between March 1981 and 1984 using the colliery review procedure. But this involved a lengthy process of inquiries and appeals typically taking 6½ months. The scale of job cuts now in the pipeline required a more frontal assault.

The stakes were high: should the government succeed, not only would the working-class movement have suffered a decisive defeat, but the surviving profitable super-pits could be sold off to private capitalists (an intention Industry Secretary Norman Tebbit unwisely let slip in March 1984).

Thatcher now selected those who would carry out the assault on the NUM. Ian MacGregor took over as chairman of the Coal Board at the beginning of September 1983. MacGregor had won his spurs as boss of the American mining multinational Amax and had inflicted a severe defeat on the American mineworkers' union when he succeeded in closing the Bel Air colliery in Wyoming. Appointed deputy chairman of BL by the Labour government, MacGregor had played a crucial role in the sacking of Derek Robinson in November 1979. Then, as chairman of British Steel, he presided over the destruction of 80,000 jobs.



As MacGregor's political overseer was a new Secretary of State for Energy, Peter Walker. He was the last Heath man in the cabinet, a skilful politician and a veteran of the 1972 and 1974 strikes. ' "Peter, I want you to go to Energy," Walker is said to have been told by the Prime Minister the day after the 1983 election. "We're going to have a miners' strike." '23

The Tories had drawn up their battle lines. How well prepared were the miners?

### The state of the union

NUM president Joe Gormley announced his retirement in July 1981. Arthur Scargill was the left's candidate to succeed him. It was a walkover: neither of the two right-wing candidates, Trevor Bell of the white-collar section COSA and Nottinghamshire president Ray Chadburn, stood a chance. Even on Chadburn's home territory, the Notts Area council voted 15 to 9 in support of Scargill.

When the results were announced in December 1981 Scargill had won 70.3 per cent of the votes cast. Not surprisingly, both the press and many socialists expected the result to herald an all-out confrontation between the NUM and Thatcher.

Instead Scargill and militant miners suffered a succession of humiliating defeats, losing no fewer than three national strike ballots in little more than a year. The first came in January 1982, when miners succumbed to a massive Coal Board and Fleet Street propaganda campaign and threw out a call for strike action in support of the NUM's pay claim.

The left in the union put this setback down to a last act of treachery by Joe Gormley, who had written an article in the **Daily Express** calling for a 'No' vote in the ballot. But it soon became clear that there was more to it than that.

After the NUM conference in June 1982 the miners' leaders began to link the issue of pay to that of closures. Already in November 1981 the **Yorkshire Miner** had pointed out:

The Coal Board is already halfway to closing the 23 pits on its hit list. Warnings in February that withdrawal of the list would be followed by salami tactics — picking off the pits one by one — have been fully borne out. The closures — or agreements to close — have been carried out under the colliery review procedure which every three months assesses a pit's 'viability'.



Carried out on a pit-by-pit basis, this avoids announcements of mass closures and stifles mass resistance of the type which happened in February.

To combat this piecemeal offensive, the NUM executive called a second ballot on whether to take strike action in October 1982. This time the issue was both opposition to pit closures and support for the union's demand for a 31 per cent pay increase. Scargill toured the country speaking to rally after rally in support of a 'Yes' vote. But again the miners rebuffed their leaders.

The Coal Board took this as the cue to press ahead with pit closures. Kinneil colliery in Scotland and Lewis Merthyr in South Wales became its targets. The Scottish and South Wales executives of the NUM launched campaigns in defence of the threatened pits.

When the tough Scottish Area director of the NCB, Albert Wheeler, announced Kinneil's closure on 17 December 1982, the Kinneil miners themselves staged a sit-in strike down the pit over Christmas, and then sent pickets out throughout the Scottish coalfield. But the Area NUM officials, Mick McGahey, George Bolton, and Eric Clarke, persuaded the Scottish executive and a delegate conference that they would be isolated from the rest of the NUM if they came out on strike.

The issue of closures exploded again in February 1983, when the NCB announced that Tymawr Lewis Merthyr and Blaengwrach would be shut. The Lewis Merthyr men occupied their pit, and pulled out 3,000 miners in the rest of the South Wales coalfield. After strike action had been endorsed at an Area conference, again against the executive's opposition, delegations fanned out from South Wales to miners' meetings throughout Britain. Yorkshire and Scotland voted to come out in support.

An emergency meeting of the miners' national executive took place on 3 March. Scargill argued that a national strike could be called under Rule 41, which allows the national executive to authorise Area strikes. He was overruled by the right wing, who insisted that a national ballot be called. The result of this ballot was disastrous — a 61 per cent vote against strike action.

The March 1983 ballot was a turning point for many militants. For the first time miners unaffected by closures had decided that those whose pits were threatened should not be allowed to fight back. Miners had voted other miners out of a job. One Yorkshire miner said that he and others like him began 'to see ballots as the way you stabbed



your mates in the back in secret.'

But why were miners behaving like this? South Wales NUM president Emlyn Williams simply blamed the members: 'The Achilles heel of this union is the rank and file,' he told an Area delegate conference.

The real reasons for the collapse of solidarity were elsewhere. One major factor was the Area incentive scheme introduced in 1977–8 in defiance of a national ballot vote. The government censored the tables in the Monopolies Commission report which revealed the vast disparity in earnings between different pits and different areas. Figures obtained by **Socialist Review** showed average incentive earnings varying between £90 per week in North Yorkshire and £25 in Scotland in April 1983.<sup>24</sup>

These figures are Area averages, and so underestimate the disparity between different pits and faces. The incentive scheme had built into miners' wage packets the division between 'economic' and 'uneconomic' pits. At the rundown pits, which suffered poor geological conditions and were threatened with closure, incentive earnings were lowest. Meanwhile miners in the 'safest' pits in the central coalfields such as Yorkshire and Nottinghamshire enjoyed the largest bonuses.

It's hardly surprising that it should be the high-bonus coalfields such as Nottinghamshire and Midlands which consistently voted against strike action in the ballots of 1982–4 (see Table). The main exception was Yorkshire, with its traditions of militancy and a highly organised left.

#### Per cent for strike action<sup>25</sup>

Area	Members (approx.)	January 1982	October 1982	March 1983	March 1984
Cumberland	650	52	36	42	22
Derbyshire	10,500	50	40	38	50
S. Derbyshire	3,000	16	13	12	16
Durham	13,000	46	31	39	—
Kent	2,000	54	69	68	—
Leicester	2,500	20	13	18	—
Midlands	12,200	27	23	21	27
Nottingham	32,000	30	21	19	26
Lancashire	7,500	40	44	39	41
Northumberland	5,000	37	32	35	52
Scotland	11,500	63	69	50	—
Yorkshire	56,000	66	56	54	—
North Wales	1,000	18	24	23	36
South Wales	21,000	54	59	68	—
Colliery Officials	16,000	14	10	15	—
Cokemen	4,500	32	22	39	—
National Average		45	39	39	—



But the incentive scheme didn't just divide the miners. It helped to spark off a guerrilla war underground. In the first six months of 1983 there were 189 stoppages, mainly caused by bonus or disciplinary disputes arising from the drive to boost productivity. The previous year there had been 403 stoppages involving nearly 200,000 miners — which was more than a quarter of all reported industrial stoppages in Britain.

The guerrilla war in the pits didn't just manifest itself in the strike statistics. In 1982 the Coal Board told miners its pay offer was worth up to 9 per cent. A year later, the government's New Earnings Survey revealed that wages had risen just 3.6 per cent for faceworkers and 3.1 per cent for those on the surface — one of the lowest rises in the public sector. The discrepancy was due entirely to the clawback of bonus as the Board tightened up on productivity and discipline.

The harshest discipline in the pits for generations produced its most spectacular fightback with the Dodworth strike in September 1983 when the pit walked out for the fifth time in a month, demanding the reinstatement of George Marsh, a miner sacked for hitting an overman. After two weeks' unofficial action, flying pickets shut down the whole Barnsley coalfield for a week, until pressured to return by Jack Taylor, the Yorkshire miners' leader, with the support of the Area council.

Faced with the Coal Board's offensive, the NUM leaders took a new tack, and introduced a national overtime ban in November 1983. Their aim was to cut production, reduce the mounting stockpiles of coal at the power stations and pitheads, and remove some of the threat to marginal pits. They also hoped that the ban would restore some unity to the union by hitting incentive pay.

An overtime ban had been the prelude to a strike in 1972 and 1974. This time the miners' leaders were wary of another strike ballot. Scargill talked of the ban lasting twelve months.

And the ban held. Miners wanted to take *some* action against the ever more loudly trumpeted threats of the new NCB chairman Ian MacGregor to run the industry down, even if a majority weren't prepared to strike yet. The traditions of absenteeism and local disputes meant that miners were used to, and prepared to tolerate, the loss of wages involved.

MacGregor threatened to ballot the miners himself over the union's head, but backed off when he found the ban was solidly supported. The NCB then changed tactics. Colliery managers began to change shift times and meal breaks to minimise production losses. They also began sending men home on Monday morning because



safety work normally done over the weekend hadn't been done.

The Coal Board's biggest breakthrough came at the end of January with the results of the race to succeed Lawrence Daly as NUM general secretary. Peter Heathfield, the left-wing Derbyshire Area president, got just 51 per cent of the vote in a contest with John Walsh, a right-winger hardly known outside his home Area of North Yorkshire, who campaigned *against* the overtime ban. The Coal Board believed from this that they could bring the overtime ban toppling down round Scargill's ears and close pits at the same time.

In Scotland they announced the closure of Polmaise. Two years earlier, Polmaise had been called the 'success story of the Scottish coalfield' by Albert Wheeler, the NCB Scottish Area director. It also had a reputation as Scotland's most militant pit — which is the probable reason why it was singled out. The Coal Board then flooded the nearby Bogside colliery and blamed the loss of the pit on the miners' overtime ban. Bogside's reputation for militancy was second only to Polmaise. And neither pit was on any 'hit list'.

The gauntlet had been thrown down, but the Scottish miners' leaders refused to pick it up. They accepted the closure of Bogside and left the Polmaise men to strike alone. The Scottish leaders had long ago taken a conscious decision that they wouldn't initiate any fight, but would wait for a lead from Yorkshire.

Meanwhile in Yorkshire the overtime ban had erupted into a rash of local disputes. The most significant was a strike at Manvers over meal breaks. Pickets from this pit closed Wath and Kilnhurst, which are linked to it, and went on the road calling for support from other pits in South Yorkshire. As one pit joined in the strike action, the pickets moved to other, until only Manton, right on the Nottinghamshire border, was still at work. After three days picketing, this too was closed. Rank-and-file militancy, with unofficial flying pickets, had paralysed a major part of the Yorkshire coalfield.

The union leaders had a choice. They could either dampen down the militancy or use it to launch a national strike against closures. In Yorkshire, it seemed they had chosen the former course when at the end of February, the NUM Area council voted decisively against escalating the overtime ban into a strike. But the Coal Board raised the stakes once more: on 1 March 1984 they announced the closure of Cortonwood.

Within days flying pickets were surging through the coalfields. The long-awaited confrontation between the miners and the Thatcher government had begun.